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Dennis E. Suttles Memoir

Suttles, Dennis E.

Interview and memoir

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UIS Alumni Sage Society

Suttles, a 1978 SSU graduate and currently a genealogical librarian at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library, discusses his experiences at Sangamon State University. He obtained a master's degree in American History and worked in the Brookens Library Archives as an IRAD intern (Illinois Regional Archives Depository). Some professors he remembers include Chris Breiseth, Cullom Davis, and Charles Strozier.

Interview by Anne Suttles, 2010

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Narrator: Dennis E. Suttles
Date: March 19, 2010
Interviewer: Anne E. Suttles
Place: Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library, Springfield, IL

Q. It is March 19, 2010, and I am interviewing Dennis Suttles, alumni of SSU or Sangamon State University. And to start off, Dennis, could you tell us what year you graduated from Sangamon State?

A. I graduated from Sangamon State University in the spring of 1978.

Q. What was your focus while you were at Sangamon State?

A. It was actually American History with a particular interest in local history.

Q. Now our first question that we have here is, what goals or circumstances prompted you to apply to Sangamon State? So what grasped your interest in Sangamon State at first?

A. Well, when I first...I taught school for three years. I got a Bachelors of Science in Education, for junior high and taught three years at Griggsville School District. But I really wanted to get a Masters in History. Looking for a school that had a good program and one in which I could get a graduate assistantship in order to help fund my education. I applied at the University of Laramie or, Wyoming in Laramie.

I was accepted but didn't get a grad assistantship. I applied at Northeast Missouri State which is now Truman State University and did receive a graduate assistantship there, so I ended up going to Northeast Missouri State. But once there I was greatly disappointed; I was thrown into the European History Department under Dr. Zuckerman and Dr. Shuker and both very good professors, but it just was not the area I was interested in.

Somehow and to this day I don't remember how I got Dr. Chris Breiseth's name, but I was told to contact him at Sangamon State University because at this new university they were, how you might say they weren't the regular type of university that would lend itself to a traditional program, very untraditional program in Illinois history, in U.S. History, and also in Midwest rural history which I was very interested in.

So I contacted Dr. Chris Breiseth and one thing led to another and I enrolled and was accepted at Sangamon State University for the spring term of 1977. I started at Northeast Missouri State in the fall term of 1976, and moved to Springfield in January of 1977 to start my program at Sangamon State University.

Q. And so you came over in mid-semester. What was the campus like when you first came to Sangamon State?

A. It was a new campus but most of the buildings were prefab seemed to me on concrete slabs, metal buildings, and the campus was in one kind of a lower location just immediately east of Brookens library. Brookens Library was as far as I can remember right now the only permanent

building on campus at the time. And with its strange angles and configuration it was quite interesting library, but I found it an excellent library to study in and to work in but that was basically it. At that time the wind howled through that area. It was kind of like ISU campus on the plains and I remember cold winter days walking to Brookens with the wind howling. But it was a very small campus, fairly new.

Q. What other buildings were there besides Brookens? Was there a building for classes? Or were classes held in separate buildings off campus?

A. That was a good question because as I remember it there was also an off campus site downtown at the Leland Hotel. And I remember taking several classes there, and we had to park at the garage about two blocks west of there. And I remember several evening classes I had there on the first floor and on the second floor in that room right above the portico on the south side of the Leland Hotel. At that time I don't know how long they had had classes downtown but those are the ones that I remember.

In addition to that what was really exciting I think for a person who was interested in Midwest Rural life, at that time Sangamon State University owned the Clayville Station near Pleasant Plains. And at that time they restored the two story brick home there, had a barn and several out buildings including a log cabin they had served meals in.

And we would have our Midwest rural life classes there in the barn. In the spring and summer and in the fall and I found that extremely interesting; it was really nice. We had to drive a way to get there. But I really liked going to Clayville and having those lessons there in the barn. So again it wasn't really the traditional university at the time, which was quite appealing.

Q. So how many years did you attend? Or what semester did you receive your degree? Because now it usually takes a grad student two plus years to get their graduate degree. When you went, how long did it take you to obtain your degree?

A. Actually two years. Some of my course work I believe did transfer from Northeast Missouri State now Truman State University in Kirksville, Missouri. But I took spring and I believe even summer courses clear through and finished in the spring of 1978.

Q. And that degree was in American History?

A. Yes, a Masters in U. S. History with a local history emphasis.

Q. Was local history considered a degree at the time? Like now we have Public History as a focus in the History Department. Was that a focus when the school was opened? Or was that a new addition later on?

A. I think Public History may have been... I really can't answer that. I don't know. As I remember my masters was in U.S. History. Not in... my study basically was specifically local and Midwest history.

Q. Can you let us know what classes you took and where their locations were? So, kind of take us through a week of classes that you had during each semester, or if you can at least describe at least one semester for us.

A. I'll try to do that. I need to refresh my memory though because I can only remember just a few classes that really stuck in my memory. I took... the courses I took basically were American Decorative Arts. Of course it's been 30 some odd years ago, and I am trying to remember the professor's name but I can see his face just like it was yesterday.

He has gone on to a museum in Maine, but at the time he taught American Decorative Arts, Museum in Society, Illinois History, Midwest Rural Life. Ed Hawes taught that and that is the one I believe that we had many of our classes at Clayville. Springfield History Seminar, I did a tutorial in American Social History and did readings in 1920s and 1930s because at that time I was interested in doing a paper on the Stephen A. Douglas Clan #72 out of Winchester, Illinois where I had grown up and went to high school.

I had a big interest in the Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s and 1930s, so the construction of my Master's thesis was quite unusual, I thought. Normally a person writes a paper on one subject and it's a quite in-depth study. But I worked with... Dr. Cullom Davis was my advisor and we devised a program where I could do research on the Klan, do original research both oral as well as written research on the clan. And also compile an annotated bibliography of Scott County sources that were readily available to the public.

And this annotated bibliography would be constructed in conjunction with my work doing research on the Klan. It worked out I thought very well and I was very pleased. We have a copy of that here in the reference room now for Scott County, but that was a part of my Masters work. I worked with Dr. Charles Strozier, Lincoln Historian, now at New York City University I believe. And with Dr. Strozier, Dr. Cullom Davis, Ed Hawse, are people that I remember very well, Chris Breiseth I remember them very well at Sangamon State University during my course work.

Q. You mentioned that you had one course off campus; did you have any on campus?

A. I believe I did but I don't remember them very well. Isn't that something? You remember the ones that were in unusual places. For American Decorative Arts I remember we had one class at this professor's home because he collected a lot of fine early American pieces and so it was kind of show and tell in a way, and that was quite exciting. Dr. Brent DeLand had a course in Native American History and that was held off site however at the Leland Hotel in the room above the portico on the south side of the hotel. He later became president I believe of Springfield College in Illinois several years later.

But those are the courses I really remember. The ones on campus I don't remember as well for some reason. But then again I remember the library particularly well because I spent a lot of time of course doing research there and reading. It was a perfect place to study.

Q. Where was your internship? You stated that you had a type of internship, type of job connected with the university, what job was that?

A. I had several actually connected with the university. I was an IRAD intern for several terms and that really peaked my interest in public history, which served me very well later on in my career when I worked with the Lincoln Legal Papers and with the Papers of Abraham Lincoln because the knowledge I gained in archival skills there at the IRAD system really did help later on. So I was an IRAD intern under Dean DeBolt who is now in Florida. Those were really good years. We shared quarters with the oral history department. Dr. Cullom Davis' office was there at the time and gained a lot of insightful knowledge and experience there.

In addition to that when I came to Springfield, I was looking for a place to live back in January... December of 1976, January of 1977 and it was through Dr. Cullom Davis I believe and Chris Breiseth that connected me with Dr. Floyd Barringer who owned the Freeman Hughes Home on the corner of... of a... I believe it was Walnut and MacArthur... Monroe, no, Monroe and MacArthur I believe it was, still there. And they were looking for a caretaker, and I was looking for a place to live and it was a perfect match.

The Barringer's were great landlords and gave me a great opportunity to meet other historians because Dr. Floyd Barringer was also president at the Abraham Lincoln Association. So when they would have the Association members and the board party for them and get together on Lincoln's Birthday, they would have it in my home! So it was just a wonderful experience and they were great people to work with.

Also in addition to working at the IRAD, I also worked as a messenger for the Legislative Information System for the General Assembly. As a messenger basically I would run reports and deliver those reports throughout the State House and the Stratton office building. It was perfect for a graduate student because of course working in government you get a good feel for how government worked. But in addition to that, there were many times when I had down time. And so I would use that time to study and to read.

So it was a perfect combination and was only three or four blocks from where I lived. So I could walk to work. So it worked out and it was a perfect job for me at that time, part-time job. We were located in the basement of the State House and then later moved to the seventh floor of the Stratton Office Building. So I kept myself busy you might say doing research, studying, working for IRAD, and also working as a messenger for LIS.

Q. Can you give us an idea of where IRAD was at the time and also the newness of IRAD? Because I know a lot of students that was now University of Illinois not Sangamon State anymore but notice that IRAD is in the basement and that it is fairly well organized. From what I understand it was a lot of work for the beginners. So could you give us an idea of that as well?

A. I can't remember exactly when Illinois, the IRAD system really began, but it was only just a year or two before I became an IRAD intern back in 1977. And I remember at the time it was a great experience and felt really fortunate to be one of the IRAD interns. Many of the people that I worked with as an IRAD intern... supervisors, I work with today - Karl Moore and Evelyn

Taylor; I can think of people in the archives I worked with as well Elaine Shemoney Evans, and these people I have worked with through the years here in Springfield.

So it was fairly new, we were in the basement of Brookens Library where it is now. The space was a little bit smaller than what they have today, not much smaller though. And we shared office space, as I said earlier, with the Oral History Department, but the space is very much the way it is today.

Q. Based on your earlier classes in your first semester at Sangamon State University, how did that affect where you went with your degree? You stated at the beginning that you had a knack for local history and the Midwest and westward expansion. What classes influenced you to take your interest for local history or what you are doing now with library science? How did that affect your classes or degree later on in your student career?

A. I think our careers as most people will agree I'm sure, evolve over our lifetime. The beginnings that we have in our graduate... undergraduate and graduate work help us... help prepare us for our careers in the future. Sometimes those careers take jobs, you might say, that we would never have thought. Mine was that way. Growing up on a farm I was always interested in rural life and the courses I took at Sangamon State University really fit those interests very well.

However, I was very interested, always been interested in family and local history. And at Sangamon State again I was able to follow that where at Northwest Missouri State there was no way I could have done that. In having Dr. Cullom Davis as my advisor, he was an excellent advisor, and then later on when he was editor of the Papers of Abraham Lincoln, I was able to work under him again as an assistant editor, research associate while we were doing research out in the field. That was a rewarding experience as well.

But it was my experience with the IRAD working with governmental records, working in Springfield- the home of Abraham Lincoln, and interested in local history, the research that I did for the Ku Klux Klan paper, led to the county courthouse as well. And all those experiences gradually led from one step to another to the Illinois State Historical Library and eventually to the Papers of Abraham Lincoln, Lincoln Legal Papers.

The connections I made through where I lived with Dr. Floyd Barringer, introduced me to the Abraham Lincoln Association. All these ties through Sangamon State University are interwoven through my career. So I am deeply grateful to experiences I had Sangamon State University.

Q. Could you identify or describe two or three most memorable professors good or bad that you took? I know you have mentioned a couple throughout our interview, but could you give us an idea either characteristics, names... the type of professors that have stuck with you and why?

A. Well one is Ed Hawes because of his background in Midwest rural life talking about farm implements or whether it was talking about the architecture of barns and of course the places our classes were held were very memorable. I think of my study under Cullom Davis, my

readings and so on; those were very memorable as well. The Native American Life with Brent DeLand was another one that came to mind. He was part Native American himself and so he brought a personal aspect into the study of Native American history that was very, very interesting and eye opening.

It seems as if the professors that were at Sangamon State University were just a little different than you would find in a mainstream university. At that time I really kind of considered Sangamon State as just a lot different, more laid back and very, very interested in its students. You had that one on one relationship with professors, for instance, that at many universities you may not have been able to have. So those early years at Sangamon State University were memorable ones because of that.

Q: In Sangamon State University's early years, University week was a special feature of the curriculum. Did you enroll in or attend events for university weeks or any type of events that took place on campus or off campus just connected with the university?

A: Again this was 30 some odd years ago and I remember very little of that to tell you the truth. I remember my course work and my classes a lot better than I do student life. Of course we all lived off campus; it was a commuter college. I really don't remember a lot of those, of those times.

And it could have been that I really didn't take advantage of those because I was working. But I don't remember them very well. I do remember going to Chris Breiseth's house at Crow's Mill in that area once, and that was great to meet other history students. It's things like that that I remember. When it comes to the overall campus organizations and things like that, I don't remember much.

Q. Just so I have an idea, instead of doing things on campus, people mostly hung out at each other's homes and had different events pertaining to what they were studying rather than on campus.

A. Yeah, there were times when we would...for the history student for instance, we went to Clayville, for instance and events out there.

24 minutes 23 seconds

End of Interview